

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 11

Article 6

1-1-1992

Novalis, Hvmns to the Night & Spiritual Songs.
Trans. George MacDonald. Temple Lodge Press.
60 pp. p.b. ISBN 0-904693-41-4.

George MacDonald Society

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

Society, George MacDonald (1992) "Novalis, Hvmns to the Night & Spiritual Songs. Trans. George MacDonald. Temple Lodge Press. 60 pp. p.b. ISBN 0-904693-41-4," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 11 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol11/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Novalis, *Hymns to the Night & Spiritual Songs*. Trans. George MacDonald. Temple Lodge Press. 60 pp. p.b. ISBN 0-904693-41-4.

MacDonald devoted more labour to his translations of Novalis than to anything else he wrote. Between 1851 and 1897 he brought out five collections of the “Spiritual Songs,” as well as including individual “Songs” in other work. (Copies of all these may be studied in the MacDonald Society Collection at King’s College.)

It is exceptionally difficult to provide an adequate translation of some of Novalis’ poems and aphorisms, not because of their difficulty but because of their supreme simplicity. **[end of page 44]**

Meditative devotional poetry presents a translator with more problems than any other type of poetry because there are more constraints. In his 1851 collection MacDonald states that his first priorities were conveying “the spirit of the poetry” and reproducing “each individual meaning.” He recognised that for Novalis “both rhythm and rime [are] essential elements of every poem in which they are used.” Thus he felt obliged to “respect them rigidly.” But the German text usually has more syllables than a direct English translation. This gives the opportunity of using a phrase rather than a single word to translate words for which there is no exact English equivalent. MacDonald, however, was attempting to make the “Songs” suitable for use as hymns, and in his later translations was tempted to use the additional words at the ends of the lines to facilitate rhyming.

This new edition, the first for nearly ninety years, reproduces MacDonald’s final version of the “Songs,” which is a great pity, because this version is unarguably over-wrought. For example, in the first song, where verse 1 line 7 reads: “Und wenn mien Herz sich tief betrübde,” the 1851 version has the simple literal translation: “And when my heart was deeply troubled,” but the 1873 and ‘97 versions have: “And when my heart in tears did welter.” Again, verse 9 of the same song has the first line: “Sietdem verschwand bei uns die Sünde,” the 1851 translation has: “Since then has disappeared our sinning,” the 1873 and ‘97 versions have: “Then vanished sin’s old spectre dismal.”

The 1873 and ‘97 translations of most of the “Songs” are atrocious as poetry, useless as meditational texts, and poor even by the standards of

late-Victorian hymn-writing. This new volume, however, is worth obtaining just for MacDonald's translation of the prose "Hymns to the Night." It has an Introduction by Sergei Prokofieff which is a model of all that an introduction should be and an Afterword on MacDonald and Novalis by William Webb.

[45]